

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**Analysis of U.S. Strategy in Vietnam, July 1965**

**(Prepared by COL Clausewitz, Chief, Strategy Division, JCS)**

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## **Analysis of U.S. Strategy in Vietnam, July 1965**

Memorandum For: CJCS, (Attn: GEN Wheeler)

July 26, 1965

From: Chief, Strategy Division, JCS

Sir,

After reviewing the documents that your staff provided, I have enclosed my thoughts on the current situation in South Vietnam. At this time, we have already deployed Marine main force elements and have completed a limited bombing operation in North Vietnam. The deployment of these units concerns me because I don't think we have a clear understanding of the situation in Vietnam. We have crossed the Rubicon with little more than the Johnson administration's guidance to "kill more VC" and maintain the current status quo.

This assessment comes at a time when SECDEF McNamara and the JCS do not seem to be working in concert. Clear ideas are not being considered. Developing a clear set of ideas is a difficult skill to master, especially once a conflict has begun. I believe that most of the high-level discussions about proceeding in Vietnam, "...are futile bandying of words, (which) either leave each man sticking to his own ideas (the service chiefs) or they end with everyone agreeing, for the sake of agreement (the Johnson administration) on a compromise with nothing to be said for it."<sup>1</sup>

If the United States does not review its policies and develop a workable military strategy based on a clear sense of the situation, then we are heading for a long, protracted struggle in South Vietnam. I have made these conclusions based on the following three main reasons: 1)

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<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, "On War," ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 71.

We do not fully understand the forces that are at work in this conflict, 2) We are engaging in a defensive strategy devoid of a clear end state, and 3) We have not properly tied the U.S. political goals to our military strategy. The U.S. is at war and we must remember that, “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The natural forces at work**

The first weakness of our strategy in Vietnam is that we do not understand the true nature of this war. We must consider the paradoxical trinity of forces that are at work. This trinity consists of “...primordial violence, hatred and enmity which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; chance and probability with which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy which makes it subject to reason.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is not enough to view this trinity through an American-centric prism. The real key to understanding the true nature of the war is to view this trinity through the prism of the opponent, then arrive at a strategy that considers both views. We must understand three main trinities at work here in 1965: communist North Vietnam, non-communist South Vietnam, and the United States.

**North Vietnam.** In analyzing the trinity of the communist north, we see that there is a total commitment to reunification from an authoritarian government. The Communist north views this war as an internal struggle. They have established a plan based on using indigenous forces operating in the south, along with potentially massive military support from the North, when required, to achieve unification. The government has deftly used a combination of intimidating their internal opposition and capitalizing on an historical hatred for foreigners to

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<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz, “On War” 87.

<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz, “On War” 89

garner public support. The government has put the entire population and economy on a war footing to ensure reunification.

As the civilian casualties increase as a result of American bombing, the communists fuel the natural popular enmity by placing blame for the hardship on outsiders. Since they have control of all media in the country, no other viewpoint receives any attention from the population. In addition, this population has endured severe hardship over an extended period of time. Efforts aimed at breaking the will of the people will be difficult as the communists adopt an attrition strategy to capitalize on the Vietnamese mindset. Regardless, any U.S./South Vietnamese strategy must make the North Vietnamese government incapable of continuing the war in the south instead of breaking the people's will directly. It will be very difficult to change the government's position without eliminating its means to maintain that position.

**South Vietnam.** The situation in the south is improving somewhat but the tension between the forces of reason and the popular natural force may ultimately cause the collapse of the South Vietnamese government if uncorrected. There is little connection between the more remote provinces and the central government. Several factors contribute to this. First, there is no historical context for establishment of a national government in the south. Secondly, there have been six governments in the last two years. These governments have done little to establish creditability outside the circle of urban élites. Thirdly, as the government continues to ignore the more populous but poorer peasants in the countryside, the Viet Cong forces continue to enlist support through a combination of pandering to anti-Western sentiment and targeting uncooperative village officials for terror.<sup>4</sup> A policy that either aggressively seeks to destroy Viet

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<sup>4</sup> Director of Central Intelligence. National Intelligence Estimate, Number 53-63, "Prospects in South Vietnam," 17 April 1963.

Cong elements in close proximity to villages in the countryside or one that fails to protect these villages will further erode popular support for the government in Saigon. It appears that elements of the United States government are leaning towards rapidly escalating the conflict, relying heavily on a military-focused response based on a traditional firepower-based military culture.<sup>5</sup> This approach will drive the vast majority of neutral villages away from our efforts, thereby hindering our intelligence efforts that are so critical in this type of conflict. Following an attrition strategy will be counterproductive if we fail to recognize the importance of the countryside.

**United States.** The United States decision to gradually increase involvement stems from its primary goals of thwarting communist aggression and preventing a communist takeover of the south. The natural forces in the United States are generally supportive of the first goal. Support for stopping communist forays is strong. What is unclear is how much support the natural forces in the United States are willing to give to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam. It is not clear that the public will support preventing communism in an unfamiliar area of the world where U.S. interests are not manifest. Draft-age students at college campuses are already questioning our involvement.<sup>6</sup> Americans are more concerned with the threat of nuclear annihilation from Soviet communism than in supporting a weak but anti-Communist government that establishes policies and uses methods that are contrary to American ideals. Perhaps sensing this soft support, the U.S. government is being deliberately ambiguous in defining its goals outside of preventing a communist takeover. The American public historically supports its

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<sup>5</sup> Russell F. Weigley, "The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy" (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973) 465

<sup>6</sup> H.R. McMaster, "Dereliction of Duty" 254

president in times of conflict, but the government has not taken any steps to solidify public support as it has on its far-reaching domestic agenda. Current plans for calling up reservists have been temporarily shelved.

The U.S faces a seemingly intractable paradox. The United States is fearful of the physical takeover of the south, but it is reluctant to seize the moral imperative required to achieve success in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, on the other hand, view unification of a noble cause and they appear to have the courage to achieve that goal. In order for the United States strategy to be successful, it is incumbent upon the governments of the United States and South Vietnam to consider all forces at work and commit all resources to ensure that saving South Vietnam is a moral imperative requiring total commitment. If not, current U.S. strategy requires further review because, "...fear is concerned with [the] physical and courage with moral survival."<sup>7</sup>

### **Towards an open-ended, defensive strategy.**

The ambiguous nature of U.S. goals is perhaps the reason for the equally ambiguous "graduated response" strategy being forwarded by key figures in the executive branch. In the vacuum of ideas or will, alternatives are not under consideration or dissenting views are being subverted to give the appearance of consensual approval.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, since the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the November 1964 elections, a more aggressive approach has evolved into a strategy called, "sustained reprisal."

There are three major flaws in this strategy. Firstly, the initiative is forfeited to the enemy because reprisal requires the enemy to do something unacceptable before the United States will

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<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz, "On War" 138

<sup>8</sup> H.R. McMaster, "Dereliction of Duty" (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997) 300

respond. Secondly, the whole U.S. strategy is defensive in nature. While that is a proper course of action in some cases, successful defensive strategies have an end state by which to gain a positive action such as transitioning to the offense or termination of hostilities. Lastly, the lack of an end state stems from a reluctance to tie political objectives to military strategy.

The defense must be aimed not only at holding one's own, but should also be conducted while waiting for the better turn. The side conducting the defensive strategy must know the proper time or set of conditions when it can take action to achieve a decision. Is it to force North Vietnam into a non-aggression treaty with South Vietnam or is it to buy time until the southern government is strong enough to halt any outside aggression on its own? The answers to these questions have not been articulated clearly by the Johnson administration, but it is crucial to conducting the military strategy.<sup>9</sup>

All other things being equal, the defense is the stronger form of warfare. The defensive strategy is concerned with retaining what one side has, and it requires an opponent to expend superior resources to take it away. It does not imply that a defensive strategy has an undesirable quality. On the contrary, given the weak position of the south, and the less than full commitment from the United States, it is the proper course of action. Left with this open-ended, reactive defensive stance, “we are left with the conclusion that if the attacker sustains his efforts, while his opponent does nothing but ward them off, the latter can do nothing to neutralize the danger that sooner or later and offensive threat will succeed.”<sup>10</sup> Unless we take some positive action during the conflict, the North will ultimately win by doggedly clinging to its objective.

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<sup>9</sup> H.R. McMaster, “Dereliction of Duty” 301

<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz, “On War” 613



On the surface, the policy of reprisals seems to be a judicious use of the defense. The defense is “not a simple shield, but a shield made up of well-directed blows.”<sup>11</sup> Without an end state, there are only blows or reprisals without direction. The current U.S. strategy is to fight an enemy only to disrupt his field forces. Just like a tired boxer, the United States may end up flailing with little or no effect other than pummeling the opponent. A champion boxer always has a goal for either a knockout or a decision, each requiring a different strategy. Like boxing, wars make successful armies deliver blows as a means to victory, not an ends to the victory.

### **Aligning military strategy with political goals**

Strategic direction is provided by the strategy’s aim point. The aim point is developed after careful consideration of all of the centers of gravity. Ideally, a strategy should be distilled down to one center of gravity that focuses all actions.<sup>12</sup> Our current strategy is shifting away from maintaining a stable southern government to a focus on preventing a conventional invasion from the north. The U.S. is moving away from the true nature of this war. The true nature of this war is not just an insurgency controlled by the north, but it is also an internal struggle over control of the area below the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The key center of gravity is to win the support and loyalty of the southern population. The U.S. should engage enemy fielded forces, but we should do so in the context of its impact on the population of South Vietnam, not on influencing North Vietnamese will.

The South Vietnamese population is the center of gravity. To survive, the Viet Cong need at least the acquiescence of the South Vietnamese. The population of the countryside is the lifeblood for Viet Cong operations. Conversely, the South Vietnam government needs southern

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<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz, “On War” 357

<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz, “On War” 617

support or it will lose any creditability and not remain in power. Finally, the North needs the same group to ensure that reunification will not be achieved at a prohibitively high cost. Losing support here would cause the North either to adopt a more conventional battle where the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces have proven themselves superior, or reconsider their strategy. This would set up 'the better turn' that we seek. Current U.S. strategy seems to be abandoning the civil-military programs that are currently showing signs of long-term success.<sup>13</sup> Viewing this struggle as only a North Vietnamese invasion and attacking only the North Vietnamese armed forces will do little to achieve our primary objective of an independent and stable South Vietnam.

The problem is that this conflict is not a replay of Korea. It is a backward strategy to assume that by defeating North Vietnam in the area below the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel the U.S. can change the situation in the South. We limit our options based on fear of antagonizing the Chinese into direct involvement, as in the Korean conflict. This approach ignores the historical conflict of the Vietnamese and Chinese and views communism as a monolithic ideology. As a result, our strategy relies on limiting military action primarily to South Vietnam. By doing so the Johnson administration feels it can garner world opinion, destroy enemy forces, and prevent outside intervention of other communist government.

Now that the U.S. is more militarily committed, a clearer military strategy is required in Vietnam. We are dealing with an intractable, deeply committed foe that must be compelled to abandon his bid for reunification. If the Johnson administration or the American people lack the will to achieve the goal of establishing a stable South Vietnam that is supported by a majority of South Vietnamese, or they lack the will to overcome the setbacks that chance deals each side in

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<sup>13</sup> Director of Central Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate, Number 53-63.

all wars, then the U.S. should terminate its involvement. I do not endorse such a course of action at this time because the cost of getting out of Vietnam is as high as staying in.

If the U.S. chooses to continue, then it must take all necessary steps as a nation to pursue a well thought, clearly stated military strategy. Otherwise our middle of the road compromises will ultimately fail. “Kind hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and imagine that is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which are from kindness are the worst. The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect.”<sup>14</sup> Our hopeful, limited strategy ignores the true nature of this war and our mistakes in kindness will not allow us to achieve our goal in a decisive manner.

We are too committed to withdraw without serious drawbacks for our larger strategic goals. We have missed our window of opportunity to choose another time and a better place to contain communism. However, even with this reality, a comprehensive review of U.S. strategy is required before we continue to commit forces without purpose. “If the mind is to emerge unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen, two qualities are indispensable: first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to the truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead”<sup>15</sup> By seeing the war in its true light, we can find the truth that will lead us to a positive decision.

Very Respectfully,

Carl.

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<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz, “On War” 75.

<sup>15</sup> Clausewitz, “On War” 102

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